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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000275

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: GOAJ'S "IRAN POINT MAN" ENDORSES
OBAMA'S IRAN OUTREACH

REF: BAKU 227

Classified By: Ambassador Anne Derse, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) In an April 3 meeting with Ambassador, GOAJ Deputy Foreign Minister Khalaf Khalafov warmly applauded President Obama's and Secretary Clinton's outreach efforts to foreign partners, including their commitment to increased consultation on international issues. He praised President Obama's Novruz message to the Iranian people, and said that the GOAJ strongly supports USG proposals for direct dialogue with Iran. He downplayed Azerbaijan President Aliyev's recent visit to Tehran, and private meetings with two top Iranian officials, which he portrayed as essentially empty "protocol." Khalafov expressed grave concern over proposed language changes to the State Appropriations bill that would significantly restrict presidential authority to annually waive Section 907 sanctions against Azerbaijan, and warned that enactment of the amended language would seriously damage U.S.-Azerbaijan relations. End Summary.

Meeting with Khalafov

¶2. (C) The Ambassador on April 3 met with Deputy Foreign Minister Khalaf Khalafov, Azerbaijan's long-standing "point man" on Iranian and Caspian region issues, for an update after President Aliyev's official visit to Iran (reftel).

Strong Support for USG-Iran "Direct Dialogue"

¶3. (C) Khalafov said that the GOAJ is deeply appreciative of the Obama administration's commitment to openness and consultation with friends on critical issues. He portrayed U.S.-Azerbaijan relations as closer than ever, asserting that "we have the same goals (in the world), even if we sometimes use different tactics."

¶4. (C) Khalafov applauded President Obama's Novruz greeting to the Iranian people, and related statements of willingness to hold respectful dialogue with the Iranian government. He said that the GOAJ strongly desires an improved U.S.- Iranian relationship, opining that this would reduce regional tensions, promote economic cooperation, and reduce Russian and Chinese influence in Iran. He stressed that the GOAJ strongly supports the concept of direct USG-Iran dialogue and contact as the best means of achieving these goals. Although

he noted that the road to such dialogue may be difficult, he expressed the hope that the USG will nonetheless continue to pursue this path, citing four advantages:

-- use of intermediary parties is inefficient, increases opportunities for misunderstanding, and is susceptible to abuse by the intermediary party;

-- direct dialogue over time promotes better mutual understanding;

-- the more frequent, direct exposure Iranian officials have to U.S. counterparts, the more likely their overall confidence in the U.S. will increase, and their paranoia about U.S. intentions will be reduced;

-- Clear U.S. openness to dialogue gains it points in world opinion, even if the Iranian leadership's responses are negative. This appearance will also strengthen friendly governments in supporting U.S. policies, he said.

Aliyev in Tehran: Pursuing "Normal" Relations

15. (C) Khalafov acknowledged that President Aliyev had separate, "one-on-one" meetings with President Ahmedinajad and Supreme Leader Khomeini during his March 11-12 visit to Tehran, but claimed not to know the precise details of these discussions. He opined that they were limited to bilateral matters and were "mainly protocol." He opined that Aliyev endorsed direct dialogue with the United States "because we

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always do," but otherwise did not discuss the United States: "the Iranians aren't interested in talking to us about you." He added that the GOAJ considers Aliyev's first day in Tehran an "official visit," thereby finally repaying Ahmedinajad's official visit to Baku in 2007.

16. (C) Khalafov called the Iranians "very difficult" to deal with, and contended that the Iranian government treats the large Iranian Azeri minority poorly. Nonetheless, he stressed that for geographic and geopolitical reasons Azerbaijan has no choice but to minimize conflict and pursue correct and normal relations. He added that President Aliyev's recent visit to Tehran should also be understood in that context.

Concern Over Proposed Section 907 Amendment

17. (C) On a separate topic, Khalafov raised GOAJ concern over revised language being proposed by members the House of Representatives Armenia Caucus for incorporation into the 2010 State-Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriations bill. The proposed language directs the Department of State to remove all "official and unofficial barriers" to travel or other direct contact between USG personnel and the "Government of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh." The proposed new language would also make future presidential waivers of section 907 of the Freedom Support Act dependent on presidential certification to Congress that in the prior fiscal year Azerbaijani officials had not used threatening pronouncements or rhetoric against Armenia or Nagorno-Karabakh. Khalafov underlined that enactment of this new language would likely raise tensions in the region and result in serious damage to our bilateral relationship, and asked that the GOAJ's deep concern over the implications of this amendment be relayed to Washington.

DERSE